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Reagan and Military Balance: His Numbers Are Right but Nearly Irrelevant

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 23 — In his speech Monday night, President Reagan restated his belief that "in virtually every measure of military power the Soviet Union enjoys a decided advantage" over the United States.

Hardly any military experts in or out of the Administration deny that the enormous Soviet military buildup over the last two decades has confirmed the Soviet Union as the dominant power on the Eurasian land mass and the equal of the United States in strategic nuclear striking power. Beyond that, there is considerable disagreement among the experts about what that means and whether Moscow has gained military superiority.

William W. Kaufmann of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who has worked on estimating the military balance for all Republican and Democratic Secretaries of Defense in the 1960's and 70's, said in an interview: "Mr. Reagan's measuring of the balance by counting numbers of weapons on each side is generally regarded by experts as pure propaganda. Even the Reagan Administration has no plans to duplicate Soviet force levels because we don't need them for our purposes."

"It is the prevailing view of experts in and out of the Administration," he continued, "that the United States has a strong second-strike capability right now and can defend its traditional allies right now."

Factors Other Than Numbers

He added, "Comparing numbers without looking at purposes, geography, allies and the like is a false comparison."

For example, Mr. Reagan cited the generally agreed estimate that Moscow spends 12 to 14 percent of its estimated gross national product on arms every year. The Office of Management and Budget says the American figure has been 5 to 6 percent for four years. The American gross national product, however, is almost double that of the Soviet Union.

Experts for the most part see such comparisons more as debating points than analytical tools. The Central Intelligence Agency was first asked to make these comparisons in the 1960's as a way of showing that the United States was ahead. In the mid-70's, Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger used them to show that trends in military

development were becoming adverse to the United States.

These comparisons are difficult at best, in part because the Soviet Union does not publish accurate budget figures, and it is particularly difficult to estimate expenditures in areas such as research and development. Also, while manpower consumes almost half of the American military budget, it accounts for less than one-fourth of the Soviet budget.

Comparisons Show Trends

To experts at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency, the main and perhaps only value of these overall budget comparisons is to point out trends. By all accounts, these trends show Moscow continuing to outdistance Washington in numbers of weapons produced and closing the gap in the quality of weapons.

Mr. Reagan pointed out that the United States has not increased its number of intercontinental ballistic missiles since 1965. But each Administration since then has elected to increase the number of nuclear warheads on each missile rather than the number of missiles themselves, a choice that American experts say was deliberately made for strategic reasons. There was an even greater addition of missile warheads in the American submarine force in this time.

In 1962, the balance of strategic nuclear warheads and bombs stood at 2,000 for the United States and 200 for the Soviet Union. Today, each side has over 9,000.

Mr. Reagan pointed to the fact that the Soviet Union has added 60 new ballistic-missile-firing submarines to its force in the last 15 years as against one new submarine last year for the United States. There is virtually unanimous expert judgment that American submarines, despite their age, remain decidedly superior in overall performance.

Another Example: Bombers

He cited the fact that the Soviet Union has 200 of the new bombers known in the West as Backfires and is building 30 more each year, while much of the American long-range bomber force is 20 years old. But again, the prevailing judgment in the United States Air Force is that the old B-52's are far better long-range bombers than the Backfire or standard Soviet bombers, such as those known in the West as the Bear and the Bison.

With regard to Mr. Reagan's general

analysis of the strategic situation and the MX decision in particular, former Defense Secretary Schlesinger said in an interview: "It does not logically scan. If we have become increasingly weak relative to the Soviets, it hardly follows that Mr. Reagan should have decided to cut the Carter Administration plan to deploy MX from 200 missiles to 100."

No one disputes Mr. Reagan's statement about Moscow adding to and modernizing its force of medium-range ballistic missiles targeted on Western Europe. But opinions vary in and out of the Administration on the significance of this. Some experts argue that unless this gap is closed, deterrence in Europe is jeopardized. Others maintain that this gap has existed essentially for 20 years without noticeable harm. But most experts are in favor of closing it.

Allies and Quality

Nor does anyone challenge Mr. Reagan's statement that Soviet forces "far exceed us in the number of tanks, artillery pieces, aircraft and ships." But as experts have been quick to point out, this overlooks the abilities of American and Soviet allies and ignores the issue of the quality of weapons.

When allied totals are added, the numbers on each side are much closer. The total number of ships in the Atlantic alliance exceeds the Warsaw Pact total. American ships alone, although less numerous than the Soviet ships, are larger and better.

The general quality of American conventional forces remains superior to the Soviet Union's, although Moscow continues to close the gap. Recent encounters between Syrian forces using frontline Soviet aircraft and surface-to-air missiles and Israeli forces using American equipment were a case in point to experts. The Israelis destroyed some 30 missile batteries and 80 aircraft without a loss. The Israelis also destroyed some new Soviet T-72 tanks, previously considered virtually impenetrable.

Mr. Schlesinger, who like most experts in the field sees rising Soviet military abilities and favors increased American military spending, maintained that there were real penalties associated with Mr. Reagan's approach. "It is unwise for the President to declare that the United States is in an inferior position," he said. "Indeed, in regard to strategic forces particularly, the issue is much too ambiguous at any rate."